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Novel Excerpt: My Name Is Sweet Thing

Fiction

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Part 1: Whose Little Girl Am I?

The night I turned sixteen – in 1979 – I dreamt I swallowed all of my teeth, and Aunt Winnie said it meant disgrace was coming to the family. I forced a laugh but exchanged a concerned look with my cousin, Bernice, as a feeling like ice spread through my abdomen because Aunt Winnie was never wrong.

She predicted our neighbor, Miss Howells, would lose her babies just when the mango trees were to blossom, all because she dreamt of an Easter wedding. Sure as rain, there was wailing up and down the lane that April. I never saw caskets that small before.

It made me wonder if Aunt Winnie had powers; perhaps her mere ill will could strike a person stone dead. She never much cared for me, I felt, so it was best I said very little. I wasn't sure why I told Bernice the dream with Aunt Winnie there in the kitchen within earshot.

"And what kind of dirty dream that you having at night time?"

We heard her voice come strong and clear through the thin partition separating the bedroom and the kitchen.

"So much to do in life but you out there dreaming dreaming away, eh?"

It was a strange dream, but I had not found swimming naked in a lagoon obscene. In the dream, I was back in Port Antonio, the last place I went with my parents as a child. Back then, I wasn't even old

enough yet to understand all the silences and the rages between them, but in the dream, it was peaceful. I spread out my arms like my father taught me when I was just five, and the water carried me gently until I was far away from them. I was thinking I could stay there forever when my teeth broke from my gums and started slipping down my throat. I gasped for air until I opened up my eyes to find Bernice shaking me and telling me to stop the goddamn hollering.

"I knew you would come to distress me and this house," Aunt Winnie was murmuring. We could hear her stoking the cold stove. "Nothing but crosses reach me with you here from day one. You wait and see. Nothing but disgrace you go bring."

I had never set out to defy all the strange rules she had, rooted in myth and superstition. Aunt Winnie was serious about things we could not always see. Bernice told me how buried under the guava tree was the navel-string Aunt Winnie kept for a year and three days after Bernice was born to make sure she would not die and how when they were building the second room on the house Aunt Winnie cut a chicken's throat and sprinkled the blood in four corners of the room to prevent the death of any of the children in the house and so no spirit would come in.

But long before my dream of losing teeth, it seemed I couldn't do one right thing in Aunt Winnie's eyes. When I was just eleven, one year after I arrived at her house, she found me hanging upside down in the coolie plum tree, my skin slick from the heat and my shirt almost over my head. She had spotted the neighbor boy pointing at my two mosquito-bite nipples, and Aunt Winnie said I was my mother, her little sister: I was trouble waiting to happen.

"But Auntie, him dare me to do it," I protested.

"You do everything someone tell you, child?" she said, "Besides, you not to cross you legs over a grave. You don't know that? You want spirit come into this house?"

It was my grandfather buried out there under those plum trees. Bernice showed me one day. I wondered why she spent so much time trying to prevent spirits from entering the ramshackle little house than concerning herself with the welfare of all the children under her care. And wouldn't my grandfather be a friendly spirit to meet?

I did not dream of saying this to Aunt Winnie.

She was right, I think. I was trouble, but I was trouble long before that, before I came to that country place named Prospect to live with Winnifred Saunders and eight children the day after Mama died, and they locked up Daddy for killing her.

I was ten-years-old when my father squeezed Mama's neck so tight he put her to sleep for good. For what? I couldn't think. She was always distressing him, he would say, but Mama used to say it was me that made Daddy angry, me not speaking proper, me not coming inside quick enough when he called, me not getting good scores at school, me not staying out of sight and silent when Daddy was having his cigarette in the kitchen and listening to the horse racing. The older I got, the more I became concerned with my father's comfort than my own.

If only Mama could cut the fancy French bread right, if only she would stop following the low-class fashion with those platform heels and thigh-high dresses that Daddy would say made her look like a common whore, if only she could cook the steak like he wanted it, and stop entertaining fanatical Jehovah's Witness people on Sundays, she would be alive, and I would still be living in our apartment in the city.

If only she could bear it like I did.

I found her one day after school in the bedroom closet. She was still wearing that blazer from the bank, the tears on her face mingling with the bloody wound on her face. She was beautiful still, her hair big and curly like mine, even with her large brown eyes bloodshot and drooping.

"Close the door, Clarissa," she said, without looking at me.

"But Mama—"

"Close the door," she said again.

"Mommy?"

She slowly pulled the door shut.

It felt peculiar that I would call anywhere else my home. I liked the spacious apartment we had right near

Half Way Tree where something was always happening out on the bustling street corner. I liked riding in Daddy's brand-new Peugeot when Mama was relaxed, and Daddy was singing along to "Cherry Oh Baby" on the radio during the calm spells.

I wouldn't say that Mama and I were close, but I was sure we held our breath at the same time we heard the click of the front door and Daddy's shoes on the tile. We held it until we could see what mood he was in. If he came over and patted my cheek or asked if I was behaving right at school, and then stretched out in the Lazy boy, all was well. Then, I could almost see the air slowly come out of Mama as she watched us sitting around the fat little television watching news or syndications of Soul Train on the only national channel at the time, the Jamaica Broadcasting Cooperation.

We were waiting for something to displease him too like the time he smashed the coffee table when Mama stayed out too late or tossed his plate with what he called her callaloo pepperpot macaroni concoction against the wall.

Once when I was nine, we got clear to Old Harbour Bay with my knapsack full of crackers, tin mackerel, and my white cotton nightdress I had grabbed when Mama told me we had to leave right away.

I remembered that night, Mama and I stayed in this old lady's house I did not know who had strange little figurines of dancing girls and squat little men, a giant Bible and a white cross on the chest of drawers. I wanted to ask Mama whose house it was we were staying in. I wanted to ask why we had to leave, but it was nice lying with her on the same narrow little bed and so, instead, I asked her to tell me a story, just like those times when I was three or four and Daddy did not start to raise his hand against her, and she used to rub my back until I feel asleep.

I could see the weariness on her face with her lying close to me and smell her floral perfume mixing in with her sweat. At first, I thought she had not heard me, but she bent her head until it touched mine and told me how rolling calf came to fear the moon.

"Rolling calf was once a man," she said in a conspiratorial tone, and I burrowed under the sheets and pressed closer to her.

"He was too wicked to go to hell or heaven, and because the people who washed his body did not throw the water in his grave, three days after, him rise up and transform into a bull. He had great big chains that

would clang clang when he walk, you see?"

"Why?" I asked.

"I suppose to warn people," Mama said. "Anyway, he would snort and clang, snort and clang all around the riverside at night, and then one night, he look into the water and see something big and round and bright in it. At first, the rolling calf did not realize it was the reflection of the moon. Remember how we saw that huge full moon that time we went to Portland, Clarissa?"

I nodded, the sheets up to my chin now.

"Well, this was big like that and the rolling calf stop his snorting and clanging to look at it. Then, look up in the sky and because it was so big and bright and seem real real close, he began to feel scared. But then suddenly, something splash in the water and the reflection ripple away and the rolling calf swear blind it was the moon that drop out the sky and almost got him. So, he take off running, clang-clang, clang-clang. Turns out the thing that made the sound was a bush tied to a piece of stone someone throw behind them into the water. The man had seen the rolling calf and think he was following him, so he do what they say. He bend down, cut a piece of brush and tie it to a rock, and throw it behind so the duppy couldn't follow him. So to this day, people do that, and when you see the rolling calf, don't be scared because he might look frightening with him chains clang-clanging and his eyes-dem blazing red, but he just scared himself. He still somewhere running away from the moon."

I never felt so close to Mama like that night, but just as I was getting used to the idea of it being just me and Mama, Daddy found us the next morning and marched us back. He did not seem concerned with the lady begging him not to take us. He did not care that the people we passed at the mouth of the market watched him pushing Mama into the car.

It occurred to me later that perhaps Mama was making her way here to Aunt Winnie, to Prospect.

Then, the following year, Mama was dead.

I did not utter one word for the first six days after the woman in a grey suit deposited me on Winnie's doorstep after Mama's death. That first week in summer when I arrived, I found a spot out in the yard with the galiwasp lizards to escape the incessant work – the shelling of peas, the washing of this pot and

that plate, the carrying of water. I would sit in the incline, silently watching the lizards scurry up the sour sop trees, thinking about how Mama sometimes smelled like star apples.

I was also hiding from the bigger children who would gang up on me and pull at my big curls and chant:

Cry Cry Baby, Moonshine Darling

Take off your clothes and go to your bed

When you go to Sunday School,

The teacher call you a big, duppy fool!

I always crumpled into sobs by the end.

"You think is we one mus pick the gungo? You mus think you is a visitor. Look at Bernie. She only eight and she out here to," Solomon would say.

He was the biggest at twelve and four months and not even related to Winnifred by blood but clearly set in charge of us. Only four of the children were Winnie's by birth: Bernice, eight, Topaz, nine, William, eleven and Ronnie, twelve. The twins – Hannah and Ivy – were my age, ten, and Jacob with the stutter, eleven, were introduced to me as another set of cousins, children of Winnie's brother whom no one had seen since his twin girls were born, and the mother had migrated to Fort Lauderdale leaving behind her whole brood.

I was the only one whose skin was a light toffee hue and whose fingers didn't yet have corns. Aunt Winnie murmured that it was just like her sister to marry a fair-skinned man just to have a brown baby.

"Our father was dark dark like coffee bean, and see there, she take up coolie man who never care one lick about her just to leave this house," Aunt Winnie said, dishing out the cornmeal porridge in large dollops. "But see, you have you high color and what good it do you or me? You come right back here to us common folk same same way."

I sat there that first day turning the cornmeal porridge around and around in the plastic bowl instead of ladling it by large mouthfuls like the others, smarting at my aunt's comments.

Aunt Winnie grabbed the bowl from me and gave it to one of my cousins. She mumbled that I could not understand how hard cornmeal was to come by when because of what she called his "socialist nonsense" the prime minister was making is so hard-working people like her couldn't get normal things like oil, sugar, and soap powder to buy in the big-big supermarket.

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It was the photograph of Mama and Winnie I found one day after I managed again to slip away from the other children that made me realize that Winnie had not always been as fearsome as she made herself to be.

Solomon came looking for me, and so I slid under the sunken bed that all the girl children slept in, and there it was sticking out of a dog-eared copy of the New Testament. Mama was smiling the widest I had ever seen her, her straw hat framing her little face. Winifred's whole face was open in a grin and her dark eyes beaming. They both had scarves bowed at their neck.

I held the photo up to the slip of light peeking in from the side of the bed. They were young-young like me then. Mama's arms were around Winnie's and they were looking out right at me so different than the women I knew. I thought of what she must have been like then, if she played outside with Winnifred and their brother, or if she got punished for putting the condensed milk tin to her head instead of using a spoon like a proper girl.

I looked at Mama's picture and saw my face. She had the same dimple near her ear. I touched mine absently.

"What you doing under here?" I jumped as Bernice squeezed herself under the bed beside me. "Everybody looking for you."

I ignored her and stroked the black and white photo.

"That's Mama!" Bernie said, but when she reached for the photo, I moved away from her.

"Where you find that picture?" she pressed.

I noticed the way her plaits stuck out like they were suspended in midair. She had round wide eyes but

there was something about the curious way she was looking at the picture, like she too could not fully recognize these happy girls, which made me soften toward her. I showed her the tattered New Testament where I found the photograph and wordlessly handed the picture to her.

"Must be a picture for school?" she asked quietly but didn't seem interested in any answer from me. Then, she giggled, "They look so funny. Look at them straw hats. You imagine if they make us wear that now?"

"I…I like them," I said, my first words since arriving. "But…is the first I see Aunt Winnie smiling. She always in a bad mood so?"

"She smile when the mailman come with good mail," Bernie said pulling at the exposed springs of the mattress above her.

"Good mail?" I asked.

"Barrel from foreign or money sometimes," Bernie said.

"From where?"

"Me no know."

"Your father?"

Bernice was quiet for a moment.

"No. Mama say children only need one good somebody and she is our one good somebody."

I frowned at the springs jutting from the mattress. Then, I took back the photo and looked at the smiling girls in their starched linen and straw hats.

One Good Somebody.

Even then, I had hoped that Aunt Winnie would be my one good somebody too.

"Bernie!" We heard Solomon's voice carry through the open louvre blades.

Bernice put one hand over my mouth and the other over hers, and then we scurried from our secret place,

the photograph of mama and Winnie secure between my fingers.